

Editorial: Encounters in the Archive

Nina Mangalanayagam, Jyoti Mistry

The “archive fever” that Jacques Derrida describes, is the desire, impulse and drive to return to the archive as a place of origin, the *commencement*; a place from which one seeks to cite or locate a starting point.^[1] The alternative meaning of the archive as authority, as *commandment*, further describes the instituting of memory, of the repository necessary to guard against forgetting. We archive because we want to remember and fear forgetting. This impulse to return to the archive is for Derrida both compulsive and destructive: in the relentless need for memory, to know the past becomes more insightfully a question of the future, of a promise and a responsibility for what is to come. It is this sense of the archive as simultaneously guarding the past and as a promise for the future that renders the archive always incomplete, because the search or desire for an origin is never satisfied, precisely because it is deferred – the archive as an institution itself mediated by technical processes and interventions that come from outside it. Arguably, Derrida’s archive fever as a metaphoric compulsive return has his thesis deeply connected to psychoanalysis and the death drive is one among the evolving propositions of what the term archive means, its significance in the practice of institution-making and its critical use in archive studies.

Achille Mbembe upturns the psychoanalytic metaphor in Derrida’s argument to identify the archive as a technology of the state, as an institutional practice built on the power to select, classify and destroy documents.^[2] His proposition lays claim to the “limits of the archive” in relation to state power, arguing that archives are inseparable from the power of the colonial state and postcolonial contexts, through which institutions legitimise themselves by constructing narratives through the organisation of “evidence” in the archive. For Mbembe, the archive is therefore a place of the dead, where the histories of colonised peoples are preserved in fragments. It is these traces, remains or debris that are integral to resisting the coherent narrative the state wants to tell. It is through these residues that counter-narratives become significant forms of resistance that can account for the experiences of colonised peoples, the postcolonial condition and ways to recoup marginal experiences. Inherent to this construction is the violence of the archive made manifest in both the structure of the archive its instituting processes as well as the repositories the collections that validate the colonial and postcolonial narrative.

The archive as institution is where Ariella Aïsha Azoulay challenges the mechanisms of archiving, particularly museums and photography as complicit instruments of imperial violence.^[3] For Azoulay, the exclusionary construct of the imperial archive enacts the original violence of the archive. The act of archiving itself the seizing of objects, photographing people and their classification are acts of colonial and imperial violence, which are reproduced every time the archive is used according to its own rules. Her claim to “unlearning imperialism” is to disavow the archive’s terms. Her approach is one of refusal of the categories and classification that the archive imposes and rather than attend to the gaps, silences and traces, her demand is one of refuting the organising logic of the archive altogether. The “potential history” that Azoulay proposes is that the violent

rupture in the archive remains unsettled and that restitution and repair are possibilities in the present through unlearning these archival categories.

While it is instructive to address Derrida's, Mbembe's and Azoulay's conceptual differences, what they share is the significance of archives as mechanisms for instituting ideology and legitimising power. In preparing this issue, the initial call for contributions took as its impulse the "encounter in the archive" as a site for reckoning with the violence of the archive and the opportunity to focus on traces and fragments, "to activate latent experiences and make counter narratives visible as touch points between prevailing hegemonic discourses and revised histories and experiences."^[4]

The response to the call was unprecedented for *PARSE*, and this may be attributed not only to the aggregated interest and urgency of this topic across the creative field from scholars to museum curators to artists but also to the collaboration with Autograph in London. The symposium "Encounters: Art, Power and Archives"^[5] coincided with the exhibition "Abi Morocco Photos: Spirit of Lagos", curated by Lagos Studio Archives and Bindi Vora.^[6] What emerged from the experience of hosting the symposium and the ensuing workshop at Autograph were dynamic and expanded understandings of the archive. The *commandment*, that is, the institution of archive, was described with wholly new possibilities and not bound to the function of the state or any official administrative structures. Furthermore, "archival" sources were no longer only confined to functions that legitimise power which included museum collections but expanded interpretations included records of community histories and commercial repositories, such as eBay. The quotidian use of the term archive at times also referred to personal documents, photographs and artefacts from family troves. Several presentations were more akin to José Esteban Muñoz's description of "ephemera as evidence", where deliberately partial and fleeting residues from events and encounters can serve to validate experiences.^[7] Here the counter-strategy that defines evidence as legal and social-scientific material that is verifiable and permanent, is challenged by recognising that deliberately partial, furtive remains the ephemera may be treated as a legitimate epistemological category precisely because it resists the fixity of authority, to protect the vulnerability of those in marginal communities in this case Muñoz focuses on the lives of queer subjects.

By hosting the symposium literally in the middle of Autograph's exhibition space, presentations were in dialogic relation with the black and white photographs of the 1970s in the "Abi Morocco Photos: Spirit of Lagos" show, which "celebrate[d] the rich style and joyous spirit of a generation of Lagosians during a transformative period in Nigeria's history. Operated by husband-and-wife duo John Abe and Funmilayo Abe the studio thrived from the 1970s to 2006."^[8] What would otherwise have been marginal representation of African history and life, was visibly present for Londoners and international contributors to the conference.

The interesting element here lies in the acknowledgment of the "Lagos Studio Archives" as one of the two parties in the curatorial team, alongside Autograph's Bindi Vora. The rich history told by these images are a product of the commercial photography studio operated by the Abes. The repository of photographs came to be curatorially framed as evidence of the "joyous spirit" of a generation. By extension, the notion of the archive is expanded, no longer singularly in the service of power to legitimise authority, where the claim "a joyous life during a transformative period in Nigeria's history" allowed insider perspectives, which legitimises the representation and validates it as photographic evidence from the Lagos Studio Archives.

This is an useful moment to reflect on the mechanisms that produce archival validation and how authority comes to be generated through the relationship between source material in the archive/collections through cataloguing, the process of description and the mechanisms of producing an "institutionalisation" in this case

through the exhibition in a non-profit gallery space.

At this point, it is instructive to consider Okwui Enwezor's contribution to the term archive.^[9] For him, the use of "the archive" is something artists take up deliberately as formal and conceptual strategies for organising, appropriating and reconfiguring documents and images including photographs and film footage. Questions of strategy in research and artistic use was one of the determining frameworks for this issue in the *PARSE* call for contributions to the conference. The call invited contributors to disclose, describe and reflect on the procedures undertaken in re-examining the archive as a conceptual and a physical space in which traces are preserved and history is reconfigured through how information, documents and images are regrouped, reorganised and recirculated. Implicit in this is the return to the archive as an open-ended proposition in which each iterative gesture of revisiting and reviewing forecloses the possibility of any singular interpretation. The act of "refiguring the archive" attends to "the technologies of creation, preservation and use [which] are changing all the time; physically the archive is being added to and subtracted from and is in dynamic relation with its physical environment; organisational dynamics are ever shifting; and the archive is porous to societal processes and discourses."^[10]

Juliana de Assis Beraldo's contribution provides examples of reconfigured source materials with collage techniques as a form of providing critical reflection on the works of Jean-Baptiste Debret by Gê Viana. The analysis positions collage techniques as an epistemological intervention in the colonial archives of Brazil to reimagine Black memory and presence.

Vera Zurbrügg and Jack Bowman each seek methods to decolonise colonial archives that are sources of institutional authority. Zurbrügg's intimate slide show uses small objects to disclose a narrative of Swiss involvement in trading of Nazi Gold.

Bowman's large-scale mapping installation serves as an entry point for his experience of working at the Imperial War Museum in London to argue for the archive as an emotional body. The triggering of responses that stretch from the top of the institutional structure to the most banal of its operations, provides the scope of Bowman's experience to address the emotional body of the archive that requires the political charge of decolonial approaches within it.

Lisa Crossman and Sharon X. Liu's contribution poses the question: what is at stake for artists and curators in institutional negotiation in exhibition practice? Their reflective deliberation as curators working with Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz in Amherst College accounts for the agency of curators in decisions made in the process of producing an exhibition. They value that negotiation within institutions can provide transformations in museum practices when artists work with their collections.

Cecilia Hurtado, in turn, positions the structure of the archive not simply as institutional infrastructure. Her method with *kintsugi* working with traces of archival images of destroyed monuments on porcelain plates extends her practice to a valuable metaphor, deploying *kintsugi* as reparative work that might be undertaken when artists engage with colonial collections and objects.

Two in-depth conversations reveal the informed impulses that guide the trajectories artists follow in developing their projects and the strategies they use to make both the gaps in the archive visible while simultaneously disclosing how fragments and traces provide plausible narratives anchored in historical contexts and personal-political experiences. Kimberly Forero-Arnías and Heather Marks each use examples from their moving-image

works to explore montage as a method to create historical and socio-political connections that exemplify the impossibility of the archive ever being whole or complete. Their palimpsest exchange draws lines of connection as never linear but always entangled and sprawling between recorded histories and those that have to be recuperated.

Michelle Williams Gamaker and Nina Mangalanayagam discuss their approaches each situating their work on an axis: for Mangalanayagam that stretches from the close reading of colonial papers to speculative subjectivity of the “free black” on the island of Saint Barthélemy. Williams Gamaker’s use of memorabilia from film productions, collected from commercial sources to thrift stores and online platforms, expands the concept of what constitutes archival sources. Her use of popular culture ephemera from various eras of film history are used to trigger memories in our collective consciousness. By drawing from a wide scope of resources, the term archive comes to include the constitutive memories in the fabric of society. Similarly, Abeer Almahdi’s contribution explores how her research stems from the repository of postcards of Arab women, sourced from eBay, to interrogate the “colonial economy of postcards” and more specifically how erotic imaginaries recapitulates ideas of the exotic Other.

In a closed workshop on the day after the symposium, we invited artist Onyeka Igwe to critically reflect on the different conceptual and artistic strategies that were employed in the artists’, curators’ and scholars’ encounters in and with the archive. Her summative contribution is organised as an indexed annotation of key concepts, terms and procedures that are resonant with Igwe’s own experiences of working with archives. She thoughtfully observes how various Black British artists have grappled with similar questions of historical representation in the archive to unearth personal stories that counter dominant historical narratives. Significantly, her summation further makes observations about the use of personal and/or family archives as “institutionally” bound through structures of patriarchy, traditions and cultural values. By opening up a series of observations on the expansive use of the term archive ranging from state instituting bodies to memories carried within bodies, from community initiatives of documenting their histories, to repositories on commercially accessible platforms to ephemera of events the term seeks to reach far and wide to demonstrate how traces may be mobilised to account for events and experiences.

This recuperative work of identifying gaps, silences and the search for identities and histories that connect the present to socio-political and/or conceptions of the self remains one of the drivers for iterative returns to archival sources/material. The encounter in the archive produces a confrontation, an occasion to reckon with what has been elided, omitted or rendered illegible as evidence. To encounter the archive is to confront its gaps directly, not as an endeavour to return missing information from the historical records but rather to contend with the “seething presence, pressing on the present and refusing resolution to confront the haunting”.^[1] For Avery Gordon, the surfacing that occurs in this encounter is not a process of archival completion but an insistence that the historical and sociopolitical conditions producing elision are named and addressed, not merely filled in.

The value of this metaphor lies in the ghosts that emerge from these elided pasts that make visible the present conditions socio-political and economic asymmetries, racial and gender discrimination that history produces and which are left unresolved. This haunting extends to queer invisibilities, which surface as ephemeral traces that demand similar reckoning.

This issue of *PARSE Journal* has foregrounded the valuable encounters that artists have undertaken in archives with multifaceted strategies to actively rework archival “authority” and to expose what it does not contain, only ever marked through traces and fragments. Individually and collectively these practices suggest that confronting

the archive's haunting is not a single gesture but a set of related practices across disciplines. It calls upon not just drive and desire but also determination to seek those ghosts that allow us to reckon with our pasts.

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Footnotes

1. Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1996.
2. Mbembe, Achille. "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits". In *Refiguring the Archive*. Ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. Dordrecht: Springer. 2002. pp. 19–26.
3. Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. London: Verso. 2019.
4. Call for Contributions to "Encounter in the Archive", available at <https://parsejournal.com/opencall/encounters-in-the-archive/> (accessed 2026-09-26).
5. "Encounters: Art, Power and Archives" was hosted at Autograph, Rivington Place, London E1, on 18 March 2025. See <https://parsejournal.com/theme-page/encounters-in-the-archive/> (accessed 2026-09-26).
6. The exhibition "Abi Morocco Photos: Spirit of Lagos" took place 31 October 2024–22 March 2025 and was curated by Lagos Studio Archives and Bindi Vora. See <https://autograph.org.uk/exhibitions/abi-morocco-photos-spirit-of-lagos> (accessed 2026-09-26).
7. Muñoz, José Esteban. "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts". *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*. vol. 8. no. 2. 1996. pp. 5–16.
8. Exhibition text "Abi Morocco Photos: Spirit of Lagos", available at <https://autograph.org.uk/exhibitions/abi-morocco-photos-spirit-of-lagos> (accessed 2026-09-26).
9. Enwezor, Okwui. *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. Chicago: International Center of Photography. 2008.
10. Hamilton, Carolyn, Harris, Verne, Taylor, Jane, Pickover, Michele, Reid, Graeme, Saleh, Razia. "Introduction". In *Refiguring the Archive*. Dordrecht: Springer. 2012. DOI:10.1007/978-94-010-0570-8.
11. Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1997.